

Rules of the Game

Unarmed Attacks (Part Three)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we considered the monk's **unarmed strike** class feature and also looked into what ensues when creatures combine **unarmed attacks** with attacks from manufactured or natural weaponry.



This week, we'll delve into a few more issues arising from **monks'** unarmed attacks and we'll conclude our look into unarmed attacks with a few notes about using unarmed attacks with some selected class features and special attack actions.

Monks and Natural Weapons

As we saw in Part Two, a creature with **natural weapons** can use them for secondary attacks when using the full attack action. A monk character with natural weaponry has the same option.

For example, an 8th-level lizardfolk monk with a **Strength** score of 17 has a **base attack bonus** of +7 (+1 for its 2 humanoid **Hit Dice** and +6 for its monk levels). The character has three natural weapons: two claws (1d4) and one bite (1d4). For this example, we'll assume the character also has the Multiattack feat.

With the full attack action, our example monk can make two unarmed attacks thanks to its +7 base attack bonus. After adding in the +3 bonus from the monk's Strength score of 17, our example character's unarmed attacks have the following attack bonuses: +10/+5. Thanks to the monk's class level and Strength score, damage for the unarmed strikes is 1d10+3.

The example monk also can attack with its claws and bite as secondary natural attacks at a -2 **penalty** (thanks to the character's Multiattack feat). Each natural weapon uses the character's +7 base attack bonus and +3 Strength modifier, except that the Strength bonus on damage is halved because these are secondary attacks: 2 claws +8 (1d4+1) and bite +8 (1d4+1).

As noted last week, there are no two-weapon or off-hand penalties for these attacks.

The example monk cannot use a flurry of blows because a flurry doesn't work with natural weaponry.

Monks and Manufactured Weapons

The most painless way for a monk to combine attacks with manufactured weapons and unarmed attacks is to

use special monk weapons (kama, nunchaku, quarterstaff, sai, shuriken, or siangham). You can use any of these interchangeably with the monk's unarmed strikes -- even with a flurry of blows. You can even interchange ranged attacks with shuriken with melee attacks with unarmed attacks or special monk weapons as part of a flurry.

A monk using one or two special monk weapons simply substitutes one attack from each weapon (or from one or both ends of a quarterstaff) as part of a full attack (including a flurry of blows). The monk need not take any penalties for off-hand or two-weapon attacks. The monk, however, does not get an extra attack from a second weapon. If the monk is using a flurry of blows, she adds her full Strength bonus to damage from any successful attack, even if she uses what normally would be her off hand, or uses one end of a quarterstaff as a two-handed weapon.

If a monk is not using her flurry of blows ability, she can claim an extra attack from a second weapon. If she does, she takes all the penalties for attacking with two weapons and for attacking with off-hand weapons. A monk using an unarmed strike as an off-hand attack does not suffer any off-hand penalties; however, under the regular rules for two-weapon fighting you get only one extra attack for an off-hand weapon.

For example a 7th-level monk with a Strength score of 15 that uses a longsword as a primary weapon and makes an off-hand unarmed attack has attack bonuses that are +3 longsword, +7 unarmed. This breaks down as follows: The longsword is +5 base, +2 Strength, -4 two-weapon (off-hand weapon is light). The unarmed strike is +5 base, +2 Strength -- off-hand penalties don't apply to a monk's unarmed strike. Because a longsword is a two-handed weapon, damage from the weapon is 1d8+3. Damage for the unarmed strike is 1d8+2 -- a monk gets her full Strength bonus for unarmed strikes, even when used as off-hand attacks.

Though it might seem odd to use a two-handed weapon such as a longsword as an off-hand weapon, there's no reason you could not treat it as one, though it isn't a very good idea. If the character in this example uses her unarmed strike as her primary weapon and her longsword as the off-hand weapon, she takes a -6 two-weapon penalty for her unarmed strike (the standard penalty for the primary weapon when the off-hand weapon is not light). The monk also takes a -10 on her longsword attack (the standard penalty when the off-hand weapon is not light).

Neither option explored here is as good as a flurry of blows, but a longsword is a reach weapon. Of course, to make attacks with both a longsword and an unarmed strike, our example monk would have to face enemies at varying distances.

The process described here applies to any sort of weapon. For example, if a monk wears a spiked gauntlet, her unarmed attacks aren't enhanced in any way, but she could use the spiked gauntlet in a two-weapon attack.

Special Unarmed Attacks

You can perform any special attack that you can make with a bludgeoning melee weapon with an unarmed attack. Treat an unarmed strike as a light weapon. For example, you can try to sunder a foe's weapon with an unarmed attack, but you take a -4 penalty on the required opposed roll because you're using a light weapon.

Unarmed Sneak Attacks

You can use an unarmed attack as a sneak attack if you meet all

From page 153 of the *Player's Handbook*:

FLANKING

When making a melee attack, you get a +2 flanking bonus if your opponent is threatened by a character or creature friendly to you on the opponent's opposite border or opposite corner.

When in doubt about whether two friendly characters flank an opponent in the middle, trace an imaginary line between the two friendly characters' centers. If the line passes through opposite borders of the opponent's space (including corners of those borders), then the opponent is flanked.

the requirements for sneak attacks. That is, your unarmed strike can be a sneak attack if your target is denied its **Dexterity** bonus against your attack or if you **flank** your foe.

Remember that you flank a foe when you make a melee attack and an ally threatens the same foe from the opposite side or corner of the foe's space. You still get the flanking bonus (and the ability to make a sneak attack) even if you don't threaten the foe's space because you're unarmed.

When the unarmed strike you use in a sneak attack deals **nonlethal damage**, all the damage from the sneak attack also is nonlethal -- even the bonus damage from the sneak attack.

If you don't have the Improved Unarmed Strike feat, you can deal normal damage with your unarmed strike by taking a -4 penalty on the **attack roll**. If you do so, you still can make an unarmed sneak attack. This might seem odd, because if you choose to deal nonlethal damage with a weapon that normally deals **lethal damage** (by taking a -4 penalty on the attack roll), you can't also make a sneak attack. However, using a normally lethal weapon represents using that weapon in a less than optimal manner, and that's what spoils your sneak attack. When you take a -4 attack penalty to deal lethal damage with an unarmed strike, you're really making super optimal use of the sneak attack -- the attack penalty merely represents the extra difficulty that act entails.

Unarmed Attacks and Touch Spells

As Rules of the Game has noted before, you can use an unarmed attack to deliver a **spell** with **touch** range. You make the unarmed attack as you would normally. Your unarmed attack does not provoke an attack of opportunity because you're delivering a touch spell. If your attack roll is high enough to hit your target's regular **Armor Class** (not just its touch Armor Class), you deal unarmed strike damage and you also deliver the spell. If your attack roll fails to hit your target's regular Armor Class, the attack fails. It deals no damage and you don't deliver the spell either. You are, however, still holding the spell, just as if you failed with a touch attack.

In Conclusion

That wraps up our look at unarmed attacks. You don't need to be a monk to use unarmed attacks (though it helps). Remember that you're never completely without options when you're without a weapon.

Exception: If a flanker takes up more than 1 square, it gets the flanking bonus if any square it occupies counts for flanking.

Only a creature or character that threatens the defender can help an attacker get a flanking bonus.

Creatures with a reach of 0 feet can't flank an opponent.

From page 176 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Touch Spells and Holding the Charge: In most cases, if you don't discharge a touch spell on the round you cast it, you can hold the charge (postpone the discharge of the spell) indefinitely. You can make touch attacks round after round. If you cast another spell, the touch spell dissipates.

Some touch spells, such as *teleport* and *water walk*, allow you to touch multiple targets as part of the spell. You can't hold the charge of such a spell; you must touch all targets of the spell in the same round that you finish casting the spell.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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